



THE VINES

ROCK'S RENAISSANCE
CONTINUES INTO 2002 WITH THE
IN SOUND FROM DOWN UNDER

TEXT: JASON FOX PHOTOGRAPHY: TOM SHEEHAN

So, d'ya wanna hear some tracks?" Craig Nicholls, shaggy-haired singer-songwriter and future pin-up with The Vines, is shuffling back and forth on a swivel chair in the control room of the legendary Sunset Studios, Los Angeles. In the adjoining live room, untouched since the Stoned Age, oil-lamp projections flicker. Religious awnings and a vast map of Afghanistan adorn the walls. As fundamentalist rock hideaways go, we're in Tora Bora country.

As the tape rolls, ghosts of epic Sunset sessions past crane an ear. Mick'n'Keef glimmer approvingly. Led Zep rock'n'roll along. Brian Wilson, you imagine, is smiling from his sandpit. Because the songs that follow, all from The Vines' forthcoming debut album, are, quite simply, staggering; veering between dreamy, harmony-laden ballads and furious, screaming garage-grunge thrashes. It's extraordinary stuff. To conclude, Craig whispers instructions that we hear tranq-rock epic 'Mary Jane'. Jaws drop. If the other songs are

great, 120-second rock attacks, then this one's a stoned six-minute reason for sliffing.

Having exited the womb-like studio, Craig and bassist Patrick Mathews emerge squinting into the balmy mid-afternoon that passes for an LA winter. An antipodean dreamboat with his bird's-nest hair and pipe-cleaner jeans, Craig floats along Hollywood Boulevard in a cloud of smoke and lands at the nearest bar to explain The Vines' astonishing progress.

"Nirvana and The Beatles are probably our biggest influences," he declares in a voice pitched somewhere between Thom Yorke and Bondi Beach. "But I like The Dandy Warhols, they're so cool. I like a lot of English bands. I like Radiohead a lot. I just think the problem's started with rock music when the songs started to get lost because it's all been about making a heavy sound. But that's not to say recording something different has been easy..."

Having met at McDonald's in Sydney, acquired a manager, released one single ('Factory') and

been offered a major deal in quick succession, the band soon found that such whirlwind progress had its downside. Having decamped to LA as a three-piece to record with Rob Schnapf (the man behind Beck's 'Odelay'), musical differences soon emerged. Craig, by his own admission, "doesn't like going out" and the claustrophobic reality of their budget meant that for a while he and Patrick shared a hotel room while the three of them continued working gruelling 12-hour shifts in the studio. Something had to give. Drummer David Oliffe upped sticks to return to Australia, while the group's original eight-week deadline spiralled into a seemingly never-ending five-month stint in the bid for perfection. Desperate to recruit a new drummer to play on fresh material, Craig and Patrick scoured the Hollywood phone book and came up with the only obvious replacement they felt was up to the task: Ringo.

Having failed to tempt him out of retirement – not one of Mr Starr's better decisions – the band

decided to fill the gap with Joey Waronker (Beck's drummer) and legendary former Attractions hell-raiser Pete Thomas. Which tells you something about the heights these Vines plan on climbing to.

"David had his own band to do," explains Craig, sipping idly on a Coke. "He plays guitar. I didn't want him to leave but that's just the way it is. We're going back to Sydney to audition people as soon as we can. We want to play live to people because, y'know, we miss it."

"We can't stand those metal bands where the guitars sound like processed cheese" – Patrick

On today's evidence, it's hard to imagine that The Vines will be any less mind-blowing on stage. If they can recreate the rock'n'roll fury and classic songwriting live, then they'll be the most exciting new band on the planet in 2002. And the album (as yet agonisingly untitled) should do for the

upcoming year what The Strokes' 'Is This It' did for the last: supply a huge youthful jolt to the existing hierarchy while at the same time reinventing pop's past. The difference is that, whereas New York's chic-est take the scratchy narcissism of punk as their blueprint, The Vines lavish their songs with echoes of everyone from Big Star and the Beach Boys ('Autumn Shade', 'Homesick') to the unhinged fury of Kurt Cobain ('Get Free', 'Highly Evolved'). It's a

weird mix: from blissful late-night reverie to blind fury, each delivered in two-minute bursts. It's as beautiful as it is schizophrenic. A perfect synthesis of The Beatles and Nirvana.

Do they see the band as part of a rock renaissance with The Strokes and, erm, The White Stripes?

"Definitely," continues Patrick. "Those groups have got an energy. We just can't stand those metal bands where the guitars sound like processed cheese."

"But at the same time we take it very seriously," adds Craig. "We don't just wanna act like bands do. It's hard to explain, but there's a concept to The Vines that's in all the songs. We don't want to say too much, y'know. But for us, right now, it's about making a good album, one that stands the test of time."

He pauses. "I'm just glad people like it." Oh, and one last thing while we're here. That name.

"My dad had a band in the '60s and they were called The Vynes," smiles Craig. "It just seemed the obvious thing to use the same name, except without the 'y.'"

The Vines, then: history is on their side.

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Vine time: Australia's finest hit LA (l-r) Patrick and Craig